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NATIVO LOPEZ, LONGTIME MEXICAN OC ACTIVIST, PASSES AWAY AT 68

GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN | MAY 20, 2019 



Siempre stylish. Photo courtesy Hermandad Mexicana Latinoamericana

An era of Latino politics in Orange County came to an end on Sunday afternoon with word of Nativo López, one of its stalwart activists, having passed away at the age of 68. Last week, Hermandad Mexicana Latinoamericana, an organization he led for many years, shared

that López had been diagnosed with a gastrointestinal malignant tumor in March and sought chemotherapy treatment at UC Irvine Medical Center in Orange.

The longtime Chicano leader and defender of immigrant rights struck a reflective and political tone in response to his illness in a statement released just a few days before his death. “In these two months, I have learned so much about cancer,” López wrote. “I have learned there are literally tens of millions who are currently uninsured and left to their own devices to cover the costs of their treatment. This is why we demand health care for all.”

Hermandad Mexicana sought donations to defray to the cost of their leader’s own treatment.

Born Lawrence “Larry” López in 1951, his life in activism started as a teenager, when the Chicano Movement was in full-swing. As time passed, he became involved with Hermandad Mexicana Nacional, heading its OC chapter from Santa Ana, and served as president of the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA). With a twirled lock of hair dangling down to his forehead, López resembled a Chicano Clark Kent, only with a taller order than being Brown Superman; Hermandad Mexicana weighed him with the expectation of being the heir apparent to legendary Mexican-American activist and longtime group leader Bert Corona.

Following Corona’s death in 2001, his widow, Angelina Casillas, announced that she, not López, would take the helm of Hermandad Mexicana and guide its future. But Corona’s protégé carried on with a Latinoamericana breakaway faction of the group and became its executive director.

By that time, López had already established himself as an activist in OC. These days, out-of-control rent hikes are gaining political momentum, but back in 1985, López helped to organize hundreds of Latino families in Santa Ana in staging a dramatic rent strike against landlords. “You can’t discount these people as transitory residents anymore because they’re rooted,” he told the *Los Angeles Times*. “They view their places—those slum apartments—as their homes. And they’ll fight to keep them.”

In other words, OC’s Mexican immigrants knew their *lucha* belonged here.

That ethos would play out dramatically more than a decade later when Democrat Loretta Sanchez upset Republican congressman Bob Dornan in the 1996 election, a watershed moment for OC Latino politics. In need of a scapegoat, “B-1 Bob” quickly found one in López, blaming him for registering immigrants to illegally vote for Sanchez and tip the election less than 1,000 votes in her favor. Sound familiar?

López found his own path to political representation with a seat on the Santa Ana Unified School Board in 1997, only to be recalled in 2003 when Ron Unz, who vehemently opposed to bilingual education, lead and funded the campaign against him for supposedly undermining English-only instructional law.

The early 2000s also saw López make political miscalculations wholly of his own making. One of the largest came when Gigante, a Mexican supermarket chain, got pushback from city officials when trying to open a location with a liquor license in Anaheim. It became a rallying call for OC's Latino leaders—and Curt Pringle, a mayoral candidate who once found himself in their cross-hairs following a poll-guard stunt meant to intimidate Latino voters during an assembly race in 1988.

Pringle saw an opportunity to rebrand himself in an Anaheim that increasingly became Latino. For López, it provided the latest opportunity to accost another local City Hall for its racism. "Curt Pringle of 2002 is not the Curt Pringle of 1988," he told the *Times*. "I don't think he's the same person ideologically." Effectively muting criticism from López and now-deceased Los Amigos de Orange County leader Amin David, who had joined the Gigante battle, Pringle won two terms as Anaheim mayor and turned it into the feeding trough of corporate welfare it remains today—a political conundrum Anaheim's progressive Latinos are still trying to figure out how to overturn.

It didn't take López that long to find other causes. In 2006, proposed anti-immigrant legislation provoked LA's Mexican masses to fill the streets of the metropolis for the historic "Gran Marcha." López played a role in organizing that feat, but he was met with skepticism in OC immigration battles by youthful activists cutting their teeth on the front lines.

The veteran also attached himself to the hip of state legislator Gil Cedillo's efforts to grant driver's licenses in the state to undocumented residents.

"Nativo López was the undisputed champion of immigrant rights," wrote Cedillo, now a Los Angeles city councilman, in tribute to his late friend on Facebook. "The entirety of his adult life was focused around one noble cause: to ensure that immigrant workers and their families, with or without documents, were treated with the dignity and respect they deserved."

In 2012, López announced a retirement from political life. He pleaded guilty to voter fraud the year before after registering with a Boyle Heights address despite living in Santa Ana. But López itched too much for a fight to truly stay away from the fray, even if it only meant offering provocative commentary from time to time. Where David embodied a charismatic

progressive *caudillo* persona in Latino OC activist circles, López was ingrained with old-school radical rearing and a penchant for hard-nosed organizing.

Now, both pillars have succumbed to cancer, as David died in 2016.

Like David, López definitely had his faults, and the *Weekly* diligently reported on them. His legacy is complex but consequential. News of his passing reached many Latino communities across Southern California, all of whom recall a lifelong dedication to activism.

A memorial service for López will take place in the coming days. He's survived by his wife, Maria Rosa Lopez, and four children: Taina, Xel'ha, Olmo and Aime. Hermandad Mexicana is asking for donations to the organization in memoriam.



GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

Gabriel San Román is from Anacrine. He's a journalist, subversive historian and the tallest Mexican in OC. He also once stood falsely accused of writing articles on Turkish politics in exchange for free food from DönerG's!



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AMIN DAVID, ANAHEIM, BERT CORONA, BOB DORAN, CURT PRINGLE, HERMANDAD MEXICANA LATINOAMERICANA, HERMANDAD MEXICANA NACIONAL, IMMIGRATION, LORETTA SANCHEZ, LOS AMIGOS, NATIVO LOPEZ, RON UNZ, SANTA ANA, SANTA ANA RENT STRIKE OF 1985, SANTA ANA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS